

**DECISION NOTICE**  
**ROBB/LEDFORD WMA LIVESTOCK GRAZING**  
**Environmental Assessment**

**PROPOSAL**

The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to continue livestock grazing on the Robb/Ledford Wildlife Management Area (RLWMA) in southwest Montana. In addition, the proposal includes the installation of new pasture boundaries, improving the stock watering system and revising the rest-rotation system. Grazing would also be coordinated with adjacent Federal and State (DNRC) lands. Grazing management would be compatible with the needs of wildlife and maintaining or improving the vegetation of the area.

The specific details of the proposal were addressed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) that reviewed the potential impacts of three alternatives: (1) Proposed new grazing system; (2) No Action, or continue with the existing system; and (3) No Grazing.

**MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS**

FWP is required to assess impacts of the proposal to the human and physical environment. The Robb/Ledford Grazing EA evaluated those impacts in order to satisfy the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA).

A draft copy of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed livestock grazing plan on the Robb/Ledford Wildlife Management Area (WMA) was sent out for public review from February 23, 2000 until March 20, 2000. The mailing went to over 70 individuals and groups, including area sportsmen's clubs, government agencies and individuals. In addition, a presentation was made to the Gallatin Wildlife Association regarding plans for continued grazing on the Robb/Ledford WMA.

Five respondents replied to the EA document. This Decision Notice responds to the concerns raised by the respondents and issues a decision related to the EA. The Draft EA, addendum and this Decision Notice will serve as the final document.

**ISSUES RAISED IN THE EA**

The EA lists the issues in detail. It also describes the details of the Preferred Alternative and compares them against the No Action (status quo) and No Grazing alternatives. The alternatives were evaluated for their affect on the physical and human environment, and measured against the goals of reaching the wildlife and habitat objectives for the WMA as outlined in the Robb/Ledford WMA Management Plan.

**SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS**

As earlier noted, five responses were received on the EA. One of the respondents was the Montana Historical Society Historic Preservation Office indicating that none of the alternatives would impact the cultural properties of the area. The second respondent was the Ledford Creek Grazing Association

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(LCGA) that supported the Preferred Alternative with some suggested changes and considerations. The other respondents were the Gallatin Wildlife Association, the Montana Wildlife Federation and an individual caller. The latter respondents were opposed to the preferred alternative and favored the "no grazing" option on the WMA.

#### **Specific comments from the Ledford Creek Grazing Association.**

- (1) LCGA felt mention should be made of FWP's willingness to utilize LCGA's input when developing the grazing management plan and to allow flexibility when working with the lessees on issue of adverse weather, poisonous plants, vegetation readiness, on-off dates, etc. in order to maintain a long term positive relationship.

*Response: FWP has discussed the Preferred Alternative with the Association for their input and intends to ask the LCGA for further input in any final grazing plan to draw upon their experience related to livestock management that might improve the system. The Region would consider reasonable flexibility in the management as long as fundamentals of the grazing system and objectives of the WMA were not compromised.*

- (2) If 6 acres per AUM is the target, then 4869 AUM's should be the upper limit allowed.

*Response: Six acres per AUM is not a target. It is merely an approximate figure used to set up a more conservative stocking rate than one might see on similar public land (i.e. 3.5 acres/AUM) managed for multiple use). The WMA is managed as a wildlife winter range and as such, the production of forage for wildlife is our foremost concern. With that being said, however, LCGA is correct in noting that the present stocking level (when considering all 29,218 acres) is much less than 6 acres per AUM. This is because the 29,218 includes the rest pastures on any given year. The average of 6 acres per AUM is being figured only on the two-thirds of the WMA actually being grazing in any one particular year.*

- (3) The "on" date for the adjacent Forest Service allotment is July 16, not the first of July as noted on page 3.

*Response: That's correct. The change will be made.*

- (4) One page 6, it would be less confusing to use the terminology AUMs instead of "cow/calf pairs and steers."

*Response: We'll make the change.*

- (5) LCGA requests an initial 10 year lease with a 10 year renewal. The LCGA indicated a willingness to cooperate with FWP if change come about concerning DNRC leases, etc.

*Response: The FWP Commission will make the final determination on length of lease. We can write the lease to read "a ten year lease will be offered with a three year review to assure compliance with WMA objectives and grazing plan." FWP cannot commit to a lease greater than 10 years.*

- (6) LCGA would like to be involved in vegetation monitoring activities.

*Response: We will make transect locations known to the Association.*

- (7) LCGA is not taking the allowed AUM's of grazing available on the McGuire property in order to enter into an "exchange of use" with FWP. If LCGA is not allowed a 10 year lease, they would be unwilling to take this reduction on the McGuire property.

*Response: The AUM reduction (related to the McGuire property) is in exchange for a waiver of a substantial amount of the grazing fees FWP normally charges LCGA for grazing the WMA. If a 10 year lease is not ultimately granted and LCGA wishes to terminate the "exchange of use" agreement, this would negate the Preferred Alternative.*

- (8) BLM grazing rights belong to the members of the Association and should not be affected by any of the alternatives.

*Response: The reference was made to the fact that the BLM has the ultimate control on how their lands are managed, not FWP.*

- (9) Prescribed fire was not mentioned in the EA as a possible tool to control encroachment of sagebrush or conifers to maintain and improve vegetation on the WMA for wintering wildlife and summering livestock.

*Response: If future actions are necessary to improve wildlife habitat, FWP will consider those at the time. The manipulation of vegetation strategy to improve forage for livestock and at the expense of wildlife is not an option FWP will consider on a wildlife management area.*

#### **Specific comments from the Gallatin Wildlife Association (GWA).**

- (1) GWA provided extensive comments to the draft copy of the Management Plan for the Robb/Ledford WMA dated June 21, 1999. We would like those comments explored and addressed in this EA.

*Response: FWP earlier responded to GWA's comments in a letter dated September 22, 1999. That six-page letter will be resubmitted to GWA for their review.*

- (2) GWA is very concerned about the direction the FWP is taking on the Robb/Ledford WMA (RLWMA), focusing on livestock grazing rather than wildlife habitat improvement and reintroduction of native species such as bighorn sheep and population recovery for species such as sage grouse and westslope cutthroat trout.

*Response: The EA focuses on the evaluation of grazing on the RLWMA. The Management Plan you mentioned in (1) above focuses on wildlife habitat. The thrust of the EA is the question: "Can we graze cattle on the RLWMA and still meet the objectives as lined out in the Management Plan? If so, what is the best way to manage livestock grazing and still meet the Management Plan objectives?"*

*Continuing to graze cattle properly on the RLWMA does not affect our ability to introduce bighorn sheep or to manage sage grouse or westslope cutthroat trout.*

(3) What are the public's options for protest and/or appeal of this decision in the final EA?

*Response: There is no formal appeals process under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The next step in the process is for the FWP Commission to make a decision at their May meeting on whether to approve a grazing lease as proposed in the preferred alternative of the EA. The public is welcome to attend this meeting, which will be held in Helena on May 12. You may call this office at 994-4042 or our Helena headquarters at 444-2535 in early May for details of the exact location in Helena and meeting times.*

(4) Has FWP already committed resources and contracts regarding this proposal to graze livestock on the RLWMA for a period of 10 years or more?

*Response: The recommendation that FWP offer a long term lease to the Association is only a recommendation. FWP has not officially committed to a 10 year lease. This can only be done by the FWP Commission. We have begun planning for fence construction and involvement in the construction of a stock water pipeline in the event grazing continues on the WMA. If no grazing were to take place on the WMA, only fences to exclude livestock from the WMA would be actually maintained or built.*

(5) Please explain the current sub-lease and pasturing agreement the FWP is a party to.

*Response: FWP has an agricultural lease with DNRC for 10,818 acres on the RLWMA. FWP sub-leases this to the Ledford Creek Grazing Association (RCGA) through a pasturing agreement with DNRC. As explained in the EA, RCGA leases the 3,600 acre McGuire property from DNRC and allows that to be managed by FWP through an exchange of use agreement (value per value basis – \$25,000). Basically what this means is RCGA is relieved of \$25,000 from the fees it owes FWP for grazing in exchange for FWP getting management rights to the McGuire property.*

(6) Is RLWMA considered base property for the BLM associated with the WMA.

*Response: That is our understanding. GWA may want to contact BLM for confirmation of that and what it actually means.*

(7) Is FWP sub-leasing grazing on these BLM lands?

*Response: No.*

(8) Who makes up the Ledford Creek Grazing Association and do they allow public hunting? Will they be granted conservation easements with this program?

*Response: There are five members, all have property in and live in the Ruby Valley. They all provide public hunting. One is in our block management program. None of them will receive conservation easements as a result of this program.*

(9) Has FWP already made the decision and commitments to graze the WMA and with who to graze?

*Response: The decision to graze was not made at the time the EA was presented to the public. However, it has been the intention to continue grazing if we determined we could do it and best meet the objectives of the WMA. This has been the direction of the FWP Commission and the FWP Department. Therefore, planning has been proceeding which would enable us to move forward with a grazing plan if the decision was positive to do so. The Association, like any other lessee of public land, would be given the option of continuing to graze since they have been the ongoing lessees. Also, they have control of the McGuire DNRC property which we feel is important first as prime wildlife habitat and second as a integral part of the grazing system we would like to develop.*

(10) GWA is concerned the local FWP biologist is not a party to this decision? Why has the local FWP biologist essentially been removed from this effort?

*Response: Prior to the completion of the EA process, there had been no decision on future grazing on the WMA. The local biologist was part of a FWP committee to develop the Management Plan and objectives of the Plan. The local biologist and other personnel in the department have had a chance to review the EA during it's development and provide input. The supervisor of Region 3 (Stephen Lewis at the time) felt it was most appropriate for the Wildlife Manager (Joel Peterson) to lead this process for the region.*

(11) The FWP implies that state land, specifically the 3,600 McGuire property, if controlled by the DNRC and a private lessee, can be mismanaged by the State of Montana.

*Response: Our comments refer to the fact that FWP has the opportunity to more closely manage grazing with a rest-rotation system than under a system where grazing management is largely based on an annual AUM grazing capacity cap, where no annual rest periods are required. In FWP's view, a system of providing vegetation two years of growing season rest every three years is a better approach to improving rangeland condition. This degree of control is not possible with the small staff of DNRC and the large scattered land base they are dealing with.*

(12) The cost of grazing livestock in actual costs and FWP staff time versus the no grazing option makes the latter the better deal for sportsmen and their dollars.

*Response: It is true that the grazing alternatives are more costly to FWP in time and dollars. However, we feel the benefits of being a partner with agriculture in this venture are substantial if the remaining objectives of the WMA can still be achieved. Probably more than half of the critical wildlife habitat in Montana is found on public land. The benefits to wildlife in the big picture will be positive if we can manage wildlife compatibly with livestock. This compatibility has been demonstrated time and time again on our wildlife management areas and conservation easements throughout the state.*

(13) From GWA's perspective, the draft EA is completely inadequate in its review of probable livestock grazing effects to wildlife and fisheries in general and specifically for wildlife using or having historic habitat on the RLWMA.

*Response: In this review we recognize the effect of historical (pre-FWP ownership) grazing practices on the range condition of wildlife and fisheries habitat. That impact had negative results on range condition. However, this EA reviewed the expected impacts of proposed grazing under present conditions. The EA references significant reductions in livestock grazing since FWP has had control of the WMA. The reduction, plus the installation of a rest-rotation grazing system has produced a positive response in vegetative recovery. Improved vegetation equates to improved habitat for all wildlife using the WMA.*

- (14) Domestic sheep trail directly through the RLWMA which negates the entire area as suitable habitat for bighorn sheep.

*Response: This is an important issue and raises concerns about potential future bighorn transplants in the area. However, it has nothing to do with the proposal in the EA.*

- (15) Livestock should be excluded from Rock Creek, an identified westslope cutthroat trout stream.

*Response: With or without grazing, we will be watching this area closely. The drainage has shown signs of improvement under the present grazing management scenario. A health assessment by the Montana Riparian Society is planned for this next year. Monitoring will be important to assess the condition and trend of this stream.*

- (16) FWP failed to review a full range of alternatives, including different stocking rates and closure of areas sensitive to livestock use such as areas important for sage grouse, bighorn sheep and cutthroat trout fisheries.

*Response: There likely is no end to the number of alternatives or options we could choose to review. We decided the three chosen were the most realistic and would cover the range of concerns over the issue of grazing or not grazing. Details like the stocking rate were set conservative compared to a normal grazing allotment, but can be adjusted if objectives are not met. Options such as closing some areas off were not felt to be necessary in the grazing alternatives, but could be reviewed at a later date if certain objectives for wildlife, such as the species you mention, are not met.*

- (17) FWP did not adequately disclose the effects of the alternatives. There is an abundance of literature that points out the negative impacts of livestock grazing and trampling on fisheries, water quality, etc.

*Response: We agree that grazing can have negative impacts on streams and wildlife habitat if not done properly, and these potential impacts are described in the EA on page 9. While there is literature documenting negative impacts of grazing, there also is literature supporting properly managed grazing systems. The point we make is that proper livestock grazing can occur without the significant impacts you allude to.*

- (18) The WMA was purchased with sportsmen's dollars for winter elk range (implies not purchased as grazing range for livestock).

*Response: We agree. However, we think we can manage the WMA effectively as elk winter range and still provide an opportunity for livestock grazing. FWP has a number of its wildlife management areas grazed with livestock. All of these areas are providing adequate winter range for elk and other wildlife. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was instrumental in the purchase of the Robb/Ledford WMA and "praised the efforts of the state to work cooperatively with livestock interests for the benefit of range quality and ultimately wildlife itself." (RMEF article, Wapiti, March 1991).*

- (19) The EA falsely implies that cattle select older forage, somehow creating higher quality forage for elk. Cattle grazing is additive, not complimentary to wildlife grazing.

*Response: The EA did not state that cattle select older forage. It indicated that some studies have shown that elk preferred areas previously grazed by cattle. One explanation of this could be that a field of standing grass with one years growth might be more attractive to elk than a field of grass with an accumulation of several years growth. We did not state, nor did we intend to imply that cattle grazing wasn't potentially competitive with elk for winter forage. The stocking rate needs to be set where cattle leave enough standing winter forage for elk. This has been the case in the past and is planned under the preferred alternative.*

- (20) GWA basically has a problem with grazing livestock on the WMA and the use of rest-rotation grazing and feels this may be the problem with the shortage of sage grouse and other problems that wildlife are having on the area. Also, they feel the motivation to graze is political and not biological.

*Response: FWP disagrees with GWA's assessment of the plight of wildlife on the WMA with the present and proposed grazing system. As has been stated earlier, the present grazing system has resulted in improvement of range conditions and has been compatible with the needs of the area wildlife. We have support for grazing on the RLWMA and our other WMA's by groups like the RMEF and local sportsmen's organizations. Our FWP Commission is supportive of grazing on WMA's and has encouraged the Department to continue grazing on RLWMA if remaining WMA objectives can be met. With the majority of Montana's wildlife habitat found on private land, we cannot afford to isolate ourselves from the agricultural community, especially when both of our objectives can be met.*

- (21) Can FWP organize a tour of the WMA to discuss our concerns before a decision is made?

*Response: The decision on the EA has to be made at the time of the mailing of this document. This timeline was necessary in order to prepare a lease for the FWP Commission to review in April, in the event grazing was to be continued on the WMA.*

The message left by the individual from Manhattan was opposed to putting cattle on the WMA and favored FWP spending its resources instead on the restoration of native species such as sage grouse, bighorn sheep and the westslope cutthroat trout. These concerns paralleled issue #2 above as mentioned by the Gallatin Wildlife Association.

## Comments from the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF):

Comments were received after the final comment period from the MWF. They were considered in the decision.

- (1) MWF objected to FWP's use of sportsmen's dollars to be spent on grazing management on WMA's. They felt if livestock were going to be grazed on the WMA, the lessees should be footing the bill.

*Response: FWP spends significant amounts of maintenance money on all of the WMA's where livestock grazing is permitted. Fence maintenance cost also is incurred on WMA's where no livestock are grazed. These dollars are specifically designated for WMA maintenance out of a special account. FWP does not have lessees pay for fencing and other improvements in order that they do not obtain an entitlement to FWP property. FWP feels very strongly that Montana's best chance to save the habitat of our vast open space (which is mostly private) is to keep agricultural producers on the land. The alternative to this approach may be the permanent loss of open space to subdivision or access lockout by large landowners. We think it is in the best interest of the sportsmen of Montana to be a partner with agriculture where it does not adversely affect wildlife or the attainment of wildlife and habitat goals.*

- (2) Exclude livestock from Rock Creek.

*Response: We are also concerned about the Westslope cutthroat trout in Rock Creek. Indications from a field review by a representative of the Riparian Society indicates that while the stream is certainly degraded in areas, it appears to be improving under our present grazing system. We will be conducting a health assessment of the stream and closely monitor conditions in the oncoming years. If measures are needed to be taken to reduce planned livestock use in the area, they will be implemented based on the results of this monitoring.*

- (3) Discontinue domestic sheep trailing.

*Response: As mentioned in the response to the GWA, sheep trailing is not the issue with this EA. However, it is a concern that certainly needs to be addressed at a later date.*

- (4) Allowing for only 6 acres/AUM will not leave sufficient forage for wildlife.

*Response: While livestock grazing will remove much of the vegetation in some of the low elevation "grazed" pastures, there will still be more than adequate residual forage for wintering elk and lightly or non-grazed habitat throughout significant areas of the WMA for all wildlife species. Certainly there will be more standing forage left in the McGuire DNRC property (over 3600 acres) that would otherwise be much more heavily grazed each year if it were not included in the WMA grazing system through an exchange of use agreement with the lessees. Remember that one-third of the WMA will not be grazed at all each year and another one-third will not be grazed until mid-August.*



## DECISION

The selection of an alternative from this EA must be based, in part, on an evaluation of how well each alternative meets the objectives of the Robb-Ledford Management Plan that was adopted in 1999. In addition, the alternative selection must consider the impacts associated with each alternative, as outlined in the draft EA, and related public comments.

The objectives in the 1999 Robb-Ledford Management Plan are: (1) *maintenance or improvement of the basic resource including vegetation, soil and water*; (2) *expanding benefits of FWP management to adjacent DNRC lands*; (3) *showcase the WMA as an area demonstrating where wildlife and livestock can co-exist while maintaining a healthy rangeland*; (4) *provide winter forage for elk*; (5) *provide habitat for all wildlife utilizing the WMA*; (6) *incorporate adjacent public lands into management of the WMA*; (7) *provide adequate public access*; (8) *maintain the natural character of the land*; and (9) *increase public awareness and appreciation for the diversity of wildlife on the WMA*.

The "no grazing" alternative does not meet objectives 2, 3, and 6. It could meet the remaining objectives.

Both grazing alternatives should satisfy all the objectives of the 1999 Plan to varying degrees. The EA demonstrates that the preferred alternative, with the proposed rest rotation grazing system, does a better job of fulfilling objectives 1, 3, 4, and 5 than the other grazing alternative (no action). The 3,600 acre McGuire DNRC property will be managed by FWP; and FWP will continue to be partners with the agricultural community in the Ruby Valley while showcasing another example where livestock and wildlife management can coexist and still meet their individual goals. While the revised grazing system is being proposed to improve the way livestock are managed in order to reduce trespass and concentration areas by cattle, the present system in place has already allowed for vegetative recovery and improvement. So it appears that the preferred alternative best satisfies the combination of all the objectives.

The most substantial negative impact of the preferred alternative is the cost of implementation in both money and staff time. The negative environmental impacts that could actually occur from the presence of livestock competing with wildlife for resources, and potentially degrading land, soil and water, should be mitigated through proper implementation of the proposed alternative.

After review of this proposal, the benefits of continuing to graze livestock on the WMA, in my opinion, outweigh the negative aspects. I therefore have made the decision to adopt the preferred alternative, which will allow for an improved and continued grazing system on the WMA. The recommended term of the lease will be ten years with a review after three years of the ten-year term.

At the time of review, the Department shall assess the effectiveness of the new grazing system after the completion of the first three-year grazing cycle. We will also assess how well the lessees are implementing the grazing system to achieve our desired conditions on the ground. The three-year review also coincides with the renewal period for the DNRC leases. At that time we will assess the new lease rate for the DNRC grazing lease to ensure it is still in the

Department's best interest to continue that lease. Based on this overall assessment, adjustments may be made in the lease agreement to ensure the Department's objectives are being met.

Based on the assessment of impacts in the EA, I find that the alternative chosen above will not have a significant effect on the human and physical environment. For this reason, no Environmental Impact Statement shall be prepared.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'P. J. Flowers', is written over a horizontal line.

Patrick J. Flowers  
Regional Supervisor  
Bozeman, MT  
April 3, 2000

**MODIFICATIONS TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF  
PROPOSED LIVESTOCK GRAZING ON  
ROBB/LEDFORD WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA  
April 4, 2000**

The following modifications have been made to the February 2000 Environmental Assessment (EA). Please insert this modification page into your copy of the EA.

**V. DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE (PAGE 3)**

Correction: Cattle are moved from the WMA onto the Forest Service on July 16, not the first of July. Change "About the first of July, a significant number of cattle ....." to "On July 16, a significant number of cattle....."

**(PAGE 6)**

Correction: Change the wording "...cow/calf pairs and steers...." in the last paragraph to ".....animal units (AU)...."

